Confrontation with What I Have to Do

_I drink the time and touch whatever’s near_
—Delmore Schwartz

The wall clock escorts without kindness, nor hatred; it has its own life without us. Even when the battery runs dry and the hands stop clicking, it persists. The glass of bourbon empties, time continues.

If I stare at the clock, my father’s death approaches, my wife’s cancer blossoming years from now, my son’s new wife walks out at midnight.

A daughter hangs pictures on her walls of happier times. She is new to mortgage and waiting for time to bring a holiday so she can finish painting the spare room.

So what if my cadences hold those I love captive in the here, the now?
JFK 1956

Father opened the door inside
the Peter Pan Café and from
that thick, boozy darkness the noon
sun exploded—a white flash larger
than the door. Father pulled me by
the hand into that bright and blinding
afternoon. My eyes squinted, watered.
We bumped into a man there
on the sidewalk in the center
of town. The two adults talked and
shook hands. The stranger tussled my
hair. I could see my father’s palm
patting the other’s lapel where
his American Legion pin echoed
my father’s. They joked and
pumped hands. I couldn’t see the man’s
face in the sky glow. His voice was
odd, warm, nice. Turning to go
the man took my hand in his—even
larger than Father’s—and said,
“Young man, be a good son. Mind your
father.” As we walked to the car,
Father said, “I’ll be damned.” When we
drove off, Father said, “I’ll be damned.”
I said, “What about the shoe store?
Mother will be mad.” Father said,
“They only have those I-talian
shoes. We’ll go to the other side
of town, to the factory, and
gen Made-in-America shoes.”
On the way there Father said, “I’ll be
damned.” Driving home with shiny,
black shoes stiff on my 9-year-old
feet, Father said, “Someday that man
will be president. And he shook
your hand. Remember that.” When
I wake in the night years later, drunk still,
I finally know what the President said.
Imagine Huck

Imagine Huck floundering on the Chicopee River past factories, treatment plants, effluvia dribbling awkward colors into the small river that empties into the big river with its cross currents strong enough to excite pirates on the prowl for captives, but there are no pirates, just room after room of teachers who steal childhoods whole with no thought of ransom. Samuel Clemens dreaming thirty miles down river on a hillside in Hartford, where his hair grew long and whiter than all the picket fences sprouting in the American Dream. Imagine Huck escaping down the Elbe River—no one standing on the shore waving auf wiedershen as he disappeared into the North Sea past Hamburg, where some English boys would sing the new rock and roll, would sing and drink, which the war-torn Germans understood all too well, would sing and be alive, alive though they broke hearts everywhere, including my cousin’s doodling in her room after homework their names to fill the emptiness.

I am no Huck Finn, was never meant to be, am a grown child scribbling this down in a low Germanic derivative after years of kidnapping children and torturing them with verbs and adverbs, with Homer, Shakespeare, and Dickens, all for some franchised burger job where the boss peeks down the shirts of all the girls bending to retrieve foundering frenchfries as they trod a muck-saddened floor, which is the path to university so they can be engineers, accountants, teachers and keep the cycle afloat, even if only in dream.